



BRIEFING PAPER

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Reform of the Disabled Students' Allowance in England

By Sue Hubble and Paul Bolton

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Summary

The Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) is a non-means tested grant that is paid by the Government to eligible disabled students, to cover extra study costs that are incurred by disabled students as a result of their disability. DSA funding can cover the costs of providing support such as: non-medical help, assistive technology and specialist accommodation.

Higher education institutions must also provide assistance for disabled students. The *Equality Act 2010* places HEIs under a duty to make reasonable adjustments, to ensure that disabled students are not be treated unfavourably compared to other students.

The number of students claiming a DSA has risen significantly over the last decade and the cost of providing this support in 2014-15 was £144.1 million.

In April 2014 the Minister for Universities announced that the Government would make changes to the DSA. The changes aimed to improve value for money and rebalance the distribution of responsibility for disabled students between HEIs and the Government. The reforms caused concern as they would increase costs for HEIs and could create uncertainty for disabled students.

The reforms were delayed for a year and a consultation was conducted on the proposals.

In December 2015 the response to the consultation was published and details of a new system of support were announced.

This briefing gives details of the new system and follows on from library briefing paper SN/SP/6013, [Changes to the Disabled Students' Allowance \(DSA\)](#), 14 October 2014.

1. Background

The Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) is a non-means tested, non-repayable grant which is available to eligible disabled students studying at UK higher education institutions in England. It is provided through Student Finance England and helps disabled students to pay the extra costs incurred as a direct result of a disability, long-term health condition, mental-health condition, or specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia or dyspraxia.

The allowance can be used to pay for a range of support such as: non-medical helpers; specialist equipment; general support and travel assistance.

On 7 April 2014 David Willetts the then Minister for Universities and Science [announced](#) that changes would be made to the DSA.¹ The Minister said that the changes would 'rebalance' accountabilities for funding support for disabled students between the Government and higher education institutions (HEIs):

The proposals outlined below look to rebalance responsibilities between Government funding and institutional support. We will look to HEIs to play their role in supporting students with mild difficulties, as part of their duties to provide reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act. These are partly anticipatory duties and we expect HEIs to introduce changes which can further reduce reliance on DSAs and help mainstream support. We will be consulting with specialists in the sector to ensure that specific learning difficulties (SpLD) students understand the type of support they can expect to receive and who will provide it.

We recognise that students will continue to need support. However, we believe that HEIs are better placed to consider how to respond in many cases, including giving greater consideration to the delivery of their courses and how to provide support. The need for some individual non-medical help (NMH) may be removed through different ways of delivering courses and information. It is for HEIs to consider how they make both anticipatory reasonable adjustments and also reasonable adjustments at an individual level.

The proposed changes would transfer much of the responsibility for funding support for disabled students away from the Government and pass the responsibility to HEIs. The changes were to be introduced from September 2015.

The announcement caused much concern and on 12 September 2014, Greg Clarke the new Minister for Universities, Science and Cities made a statement in which he said that the changes would be delayed until 2016-17,² to give HEIs more time to prepare.

Library briefing paper SN/SP/6013, [Changes to the Disabled Students' Allowance \(DSA\)](#), 14 October 2014, discusses the original proposals and debate up until the September 2014 announcement.

¹ [HC Deb 7 April 2014 c 2WS](#)

² [HC Deb 12 Sep 2014 c 46WS](#)

5 Reform of the Disabled Students' Allowance in England

This note sets out subsequent developments on DSA policy and current proposals.

2. Introduction

The number of students in higher education with some form of disability has increased significantly over the last few years. In 2012-13 DSAs provided £145.8 million of additional support for 64,500 disabled higher education students, compared with £101.3 million awarded to 47,400 students in 2009-10, a rise of around 44 per cent.³

Box 1: Increase in take-up rate of DSA

A report by the Equality Challenge Unit in 2015,⁴ gives data on the number of disabled students in higher education across the UK. The report shows that the number of students in higher education who declared themselves as disabled nearly doubled in the last ten years.⁵ In 2003/4 5.4 per cent of the total student population disclosed as disabled, and in 2013/14 this had risen to 10 per cent. The Equality Unit report also showed that between 2003/04 and 2013/14, the rate of DSA take-up among disabled students for whom DSA information was known, increased by 3.4 percentage points peaking at 46.1 per cent in 2009/10. In 2013/14, the take-up rate was 45.9 per cent.

The increase in the number of disabled students has led to the current proposals for reform of the system of support for disabled students.

Provision of support for students with disabilities is split between HEIs and publicly funded DSAs. Legislation in the *Equality Act 2010* places HEIs under a statutory duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students (see Appendix). This duty includes making reasonable changes to practices, the physical environment and the provision of auxiliary aids and services. The DSA provides disabled students with additional funding for the purchase of laptops and specialist equipment, provision of support workers and assistance with additional travel costs.

DSAs have been available since 1974, and the four separate allowances (non-medical help allowance, specialist equipment allowance, general allowance and travel allowance) were introduced in 1990. The proposed changes are the first major reform of the system; the new system aims to achieve improved value for money, while ensuring those most in need still get the help they require.

The reforms will make HEIs responsible for the support needs of students with milder difficulties and DSAs will remain available to support those disabled students who require additional help.

³ [HC Deb 2 December 2015, c15 WS](#)

⁴ Equality Challenge Unit, [Equality in higher education: statistical report 2015, Part 2: students](#)

⁵ *ibid*, p 74

3. Expenditure on DSAs and recipients

The following table gives a breakdown of DSA recipients and payments from 2009/10 onwards. Total spending on full-time undergraduates increased from £88 million in 2009/10 to £134 million in 2013/14 and recipients (of one or more DSA types) from 42,000 to just over 60,000. Provisional 2014/15 data are below final 2013/14 levels, but the number of recipients is slightly up compared to the same point in 2013/14. Just over half of DSA spending was for non-medical helpers DSA and just over a quarter for equipment. The average total payment per recipient was just over £2,200 in 2013/14, somewhat less than in earlier years.

There were 8,400 part-time or postgraduate DSA recipients in 2013/14 and spending was £18.5 million on these students. Provisional 2014/15 data for part-time students shows a clear increase and reverses the fall seen in 2013/14.

DSA awards by type to English students

	Full-time undergraduates					Part-time	Post-graduate
	Non-medical helpers	Equipment	General	Travel	Total		
Recipients (000s)							
2009/10	..	..	..	..	41.7	..	..
2010/11	41.1	26.9	19.6	1.6	47.4	2.6	3.9
2011/12	47.0	29.1	22.4	1.7	53.3	3.0	4.7
2012/13	48.8	27.8	24.3	2.0	56.6	3.0	4.9
2013/14	42.6	29.9	46.4	2.2	60.2	2.7	5.6
2014/15p	41.0	26.4	43.3	2.2	58.9	3.3	5.5
Amount paid (£ million)							
2009/10	..	..	..	..	87.8	..	..
2010/11	60.3	42.0	4.4	2.4	109.2	6.9	9.6
2011/12	74.1	43.4	4.6	3.0	125.1	7.9	11.8
2012/13	81.9	36.9	4.9	3.8	127.6	7.3	10.9
2013/14	69.4	36.2	24.1	4.5	134.2	6.6	11.9
2014/15p	67.5	30.3	23.4	4.5	125.7	7.7	10.7
Average per recipient							
2009/10	..	..	..	..	2,105	..	..
2010/11	..	..	..	..	2,305	2,615	2,485
2011/12	..	..	..	..	2,345	2,585	2,515
2012/13	..	..	..	..	2,255	2,445	2,235
2013/14	..	..	..	..	2,230	2,430	2,110
2014/15p	..	..	..	..	2,135	2,350	1,955

Notes: 2014/15 data are provisional and are expected to increase when final figures are produced
There was a reclassification from non-medical helpers to general in 2013/14

Source: Student support for higher education in England 2015: 2014/15 payments, 2015/16 awards (and earlier), SLC

4. Equality analysis of DSA proposals

In December 2014 the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) published an equality impact assessment report on the proposed changes, this is available at [Disabled Students' Allowances: Equality Analysis, December 2014](#). The report contained the following summary analysis of the overall impact of the proposed changes to the DSA:

- The available data suggests that young students (under 21) are also particularly likely to be affected by the overall change to the DSAs offer: compared to non-disabled higher education entrants, DSAs recipients have a younger age profile.
- The proportion of full-time undergraduate DSA recipients awarded the full maintenance grant is higher than for the wider student population who have received some form of student support (47% compared to 43%). This suggests that recipients from low income households could be more affected by the overall changes to the package of DSAs support. Analysis shows that students that receive DSAs and are from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be mature and from a minority ethnic background and could therefore be more affected than other groups of students. P49

Changes to the individual elements of support, such as the removal of funding for standard computers, are examined separately in the report to ascertain whether each proposed change could potentially affect other protected groups disproportionately within the disabled student population.

5. Consultation on DSA proposals

A consultation on changes to the DSA opened in July 2015 – BIS document, [Consultation on targeting funding for disabled students in Higher Education from 2016/17 onwards](#).

The consultation document set out details of the Government's preferred options for changes to the DSA (p14-29):

Options for changes to Non-Medical Help (NMH) support

Government's Preferred Option: HE Providers have primary responsibility for providing certain NMH support with DSAs used for specialist support or by exception.

Accommodation, peripheral equipment and consumables

Accommodation

It is proposed that DSAs are no longer available for the additional costs of specialist accommodation where that accommodation is owned and managed by the HE provider or its agent.

DSAs would continue to be available towards the additional costs of accommodation where the additional costs are incurred solely because of the student's disability, and where it would not be reasonable for the HE provider to meet the costs of such an adjustment.

Exceptions to the general policy would be considered on a case by case basis through the Exceptional Case Process

DSAs funding would also remain available to students living in other types of accommodation where additional costs are incurred because of their disability, for example students renting accommodation in the private sector

Peripheral equipment and consumables

Standard computer peripherals

The Government's preferred approach is that DSAs funding will no longer be available for the purchase of standard keyboards, standard size monitors and standard mice as a matter of course, unless they form part of a recommendation for a desktop computer. This is because, in most cases, the need for these items is not solely due to the student's disability.

Details of the type of non-medical help that would continue to be provided through DSAs was set out on p18-25 of the report.

The preferred options for change set out in the consultation document are in line with the changes originally outlined by David Willetts MP in the announcement on 7 April 2014 which proposed: ending payments for standard computers and most specialist accommodation and restricting DSA payments to high needs or complex cases with HE institutions providing for other standard cases.

The consultation closed on 24th September 2015.

5.1 Government response to the consultation

The Government response to the consultation was published on 2 December 2015, Government response [Consultation on targeting](#)

[funding for disabled students in Higher Education from 2016/17 onwards](#), December 2015.

Respondents to the consultation said that they would like more clarity about best practice for reasonable adjustments and they said that cost was the main reason for an institution not considering an adjustment to be reasonable. The Government said that they would work with stakeholders to produce guidance for HEIs before 2016/17.

Many respondents questioned the Government's preferred options for change, but responses showed no consensus on the best way to achieve the overall policy aims and no compelling evidence was provided to support other ways to achieve the aims.

Most respondents agreed with the Government's proposals on accommodation, and the provision of peripheral equipment and consumables. The Government agreed with respondents on the provision of scanners, printers and laptop cases and agreed to continue funding these items.

The Government said that having considered the responses changes to the DSA would be introduced in the academic year 2016/17 and the Government did not plan to provide institutions with additional funding to offset any changes. The changes should save around £24.5 million per year once the reforms are fully implemented.

6. Changes introduced in 2015/16

Mr Clarke's statement in September 2015 delaying the full implementation of the DSA changes, said that some reforms would go ahead in 2015/16. It was announced that from the academic year 2015-16 disabled students would have to contribute the first £200 towards the cost of a computer. The Government said that this was 'broadly equivalent to the cost of a basic computer'.⁶

This change reflects one of the premises of the DSA reforms - that changes were necessary because the current system did not 'recognise technological advances' and 'increases in the use of technology'.

It was suggested that providing standard specification computers for disabled students was unfair on non-disabled students, as all students needed a basic computer for studying and providing disabled students with these computers was in effect treated disabled students more favourably than other students.

⁶ [HC Deb 12 Sep 2014 c 46WS](#)

7. DSA announcement December 2015 – changes from 2016/17

On 2 December 2015 the Minister for Universities and Science, Jo Johnson, [announced](#) a new system of support for disabled students.⁷ Under the new system DSAs will retain responsibility for funding sighted guides, and the most specialist non-medical help - DSAs will also meet the additional costs of accommodation where that accommodation is not provided by HEIs. All other support should be provided by HEIs.

The key changes, which will take effect from academic year 2016/17, are set out below:

- **DSAs will retain primary responsibility for funding Sighted Guides, for those students that need such support to enable them to get around campus effectively.** HE providers will be expected to take primary responsibility for the remainder of the non-medical support roles that are classified as bands 1 or 2 in the Student Loans Company non-medical help (NMH) manual. We will seek further information from stakeholders, including from disabled students and their representatives, on whether specific exceptions to this general rule should apply. In addition, HE providers are expected to consider how they deliver information to students and whether strategies can be put in place to reduce the need for support workers and encourage greater independence and autonomy for their disabled students.
- **DSAs will retain primary responsibility for funding the most specialist non-medical help support, that are set out in the SLC NMH manual under bands 3 and 4, with the exception of Specialist Transcription Services.** HE providers will be expected to take primary responsibility for the provision of Specialist Transcription Services, other than by exception.
- **DSAs will meet the additional costs of accommodation where that accommodation is not provided by the HE provider or its agent.** DSAs funding will not be available where specialist accommodation is provided by the HE provider or their agent, other than by exception. HE providers should no longer pass any additional costs for accommodation onto the student.
- **Devices for printing and scanning will continue to be funded through DSAs.** However, HE providers are expected to strive to meet the needs of their disabled students to reduce the need for the purchase of individual devices for printing and scanning. The assessment process will be more robust and individual devices will only be funded if the need cannot be met through other measures.
- **Standard computer peripherals and other accessories will now be funded by exception only.** Laptop carry cases will continue to be provided as standard to help students protect their equipment.

⁷ [HC Deb 2 December 2015, c15 WS](#)

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The changes announced in the statement will apply to all full-time, full-time distance learning, part-time and postgraduate students applying for DSAs for the first time after 1 September 2016.

Existing DSAs students will remain on their existing system of support for 2016/17.

The changes to the DSA are discussed in an article in the *Guardian*, "[Government to cut funding for disabled university students](#)", 2 December 2015.

8. Issues

8.1 Impact of DSAs

A 2014 report by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) [National strategy for access and student success in higher education](#), stated that students with disabilities were less likely than other students to complete a degree, it also showed that students receiving a DSA did better than those who did not:

Disability

16. HEFCE 2013/07 shows that entrants to full-time first degrees in 2010-11 who are known to be disabled are less likely to remain in HE (8.2 per cent non-continuation) at the end of year one when compared to those not known to be disabled (7.4 per cent non-continuation).

17. There are also disparities in student success between those who receive Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), those who declare a disability but do not receive DSA, and those not known to be disabled. Figure 13 shows that students who received DSA performed above the sector-adjusted average, whereas disabled students not receiving DSA performed below it. To put this in context, the ECU's 2012 statistical report³² shows that in 2010-11, 8 per cent of all students were classified as disabled, but of these students less than half claimed DSA. In first year students this statistic is even lower: in 2010-11, 6.9 per cent were known to be disabled, but only 33 per cent of them claimed DSA. (p49)

The BIS report called for more detailed data concerning disabled students to be collected, so that higher education providers could tailor support more effectively to the specific needs of their disabled students.

8.2 Cut in the Student Opportunity Fund

HEFCE supports universities and colleges in their work to widen access and improve student success through the Student Opportunity Fund. In 2014-15, HEFCE distributed £366 million through this fund. Part of this funding (£15 million) is allocated to reflect the numbers of disabled students at institutions.

In November 2015 the Government announced in the Spending Review and Autumn Statement that it wanted universities take more responsibility for widening access and social mobility. Spending Review announced that Government would ask the Higher Education Funding Council for England to retarget and reduce by up to half, the student opportunity fund, focusing funding on institutions with the most effective outcomes.

A briefing by million + [Changes to Disabled Students Allowance](#), comments on the reduction in the Student Opportunity Fund and the impact this could have on students when the changes to DSAs are implemented.

9. Comments on the changes to DSAs

Disability Rights UK

Whilst Disability Rights UK are disappointed that this policy is still being taken forward we have worked on behalf of disabled people and in alliance with other stakeholders in our role as co-ordinators of the "No cap on aspiration – DSA" group and congratulate all members for winning potentially important concessions from the Government.

There are concessions on DSA being available for specialist accommodation, scanners and printers and laptop cases, sighted guides and specialist transcription and some gains in respect of non-medical help and new commitments to our demands in respect of the exceptional case procedures, emphasis on inclusive teaching practice and commitments to a new quality assurance framework.

"It remains to be seen from the detail and implementation what discretion the universities can exercise but the concessions do demonstrate the value of continued lobbying and collective action," said Philip Connolly, Disability Rights UK's Policy Manager and chair of "No cap on aspiration – DSA".⁸

National Deaf Children's Society

Susan Daniels, Chief Executive of the National Deaf Children's Society said:

"We are bitterly disappointed that the Government has announced it will cut Disabled Students Allowance, which is a lifeline for so many deaf students at university.

"We know that deaf students can achieve just as much as their hearing peers, but the right support must be in place. As it stands, we have no way of knowing if universities will pick up the cost of vital support staff. Deaf students desperately need support such as notetakers because they cannot lipread a lecturer or follow a sign language interpreter and take notes at the same time.

"Deaf young people are telling us they feel the Government is intent on making it more difficult for them to go to university. We strongly believe the Government must think again or guarantee safeguards will be in place to protect deaf students."⁹

National Union of Students

Maddy Kirkman, NUS disabled students officer, said: "All disabled students deserve to have the support they need to access higher education. The NUS is concerned the government's response to the consultation will impact the consistency of the support available and place a huge financial burden on some institutions. To make higher education accessible, the government needs to

⁸ Disability Rights UK, [Our Statement on the Government's response to DSA proposals](#), 2 December 2015 -

⁹ National Deaf Children's Society, [Deaf News: NDCS hits out at Government over cut to Disabled Students Allowance](#), 3 December 2015

work with students and institutions and take our views into account, not brush them aside.”¹⁰

¹⁰ [“Government to cut funding for disabled university students”](#), *The Guardian*, 3 December 2015

Appendix: Disabled students and access to higher education

9.1 Legislation

The duties of further and higher education institutions with regard to students with disabilities are set out in the [Equality Act 2010](#), Chapter 2.

The Act states that disabled students should **not be treated less favourably** than other students and the Act places HEIs under a **duty to make reasonable adjustments** to ensure that people who are disabled are **not put at a substantial disadvantage** compared to people who are not disabled in accessing higher education.

Section 149 of the *Equality Act 2010* contains the Public Sector Equality Duty which requires public bodies, including HEIs, to comply with general duties to eliminate discrimination, to promote equality of opportunity, and to foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

Definition of disability under the *Equality Act 2010*

The *Equality Act 2010*, Section 6 defines disability in the following way:

A person has a disability if they have a physical or mental impairment, and the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

Substantial is defined in the Act as 'more than minor or trivial'. This definition therefore gives parity of esteem to physical/ visible conditions and unseen disabilities such as mental illness, dyslexia and Asperger's Syndrome.

9.2 Implementation of the *Equality Act 2010* by HEIs

Governing bodies of HEIs are, as a matter of law, responsible for ensuring their institutions comply with the provisions in the *Equality Act 2010* and meet the proactive public sector equality duty (PSED). Institutions however can choose to interpret the law in a variety of ways. Guidance for institutions on their responsibilities is provided in a publication by the Equality and Human Rights Commission - [Equality Act 2010 Technical Guidance on Further and Higher Education](#), November 2012 – chapter 7 covers the duty to make reasonable adjustments.

9.3 Duty to make reasonable adjustments

The *Equality Act 2010* requires bodies to make **reasonable adjustments** for disabled people - this duty aims to ensure that disabled people do not face 'substantial disadvantage' in comparison with non-disabled people. Section 20 of the Act defines what is meant by the duty to make reasonable adjustments. The first requirement of the duty covers changing the way things are done (such as changing a

practice), the second covers making changes to the built environment (such as providing access to a building), and the third covers providing auxiliary aids and services (such as providing special computer software or providing a different service). The duty is anticipatory.

9.4 Access agreements and support for disabled students

All higher education institutions (HEIs) charging fees of over £6,000 per year must have access agreements in place which have been agreed by OFFA. OFFA encourage HEIs to include their support for disabled student in these agreements. The OFFA webpage, [Topic briefing: disability](#) gives information on HEI's access arrangements:

How are institutions addressing disability in access agreements?

We have seen a growing commitment to support disabled students in access agreements in recent years. This is in response to our increasing focus on this area in our access agreement guidance. Institutions are increasingly considering a more inclusive teaching and learning approach so that the needs of the whole student body can be met rather than disabled students being targeted as a separate group.

Almost all institutions (over 95 per cent) mentioned disabled students within both their 2014-15 and 2015-16 access agreements. This included activity across all stages of the lifecycle. But only a very small proportion of institutions, around 5 per cent, reported this in a way that disaggregated between different types of disability.

Looking across the student lifecycle, we can see some significant differences in the support offered by institutions through access agreements.

Access

Around a quarter of institutions specifically mentioned activities designed to support and encourage disabled students to access higher education.

Most of this was transition support that was available to students once they had enrolled at an institution.

Student success

Over half of institutions included information on student success activities designed to support disabled students.

The most common types of support mentioned were focused pastoral support (around 13 per cent of institutions), and mentoring schemes (around 12 per cent of institutions).

Progression

Less than 10 per cent of institutions mentioned providing support for disabled people to seek employment after graduation.

The progression activities mentioned included the provision of dedicated career development services and support in finding work experiences or placements.

No institutions mentioned activities to support disabled people to access postgraduate study in their 2014-15 access agreements

and about 1 per cent of institutions mentioned postgraduate support for disabled students in their 2015-16 access agreements.

Financial support

Around a third of institutions provide financial support for disabled students through bursaries and scholarships (although students may qualify for other bursary schemes in addition to this).

Support varies, and includes: cash awards ranging from £500 to £4,500, hardship funds, and support with the cost of diagnostic assessments and specialist equipment.

Targets

Half of institutions have set targets relating to disability in their 2015-16 access agreements. Targets relating to disability in 2015-16 access agreements cover all stages of the student lifecycle.

Targets frequently mentioned include: increasing pre-entry activities (including summer schools, open days and awareness training) and support and information for disabled students increasing the proportion of students who declare a disability.

A third of institutions have set targets that relate specifically to students in receipt of DSA.

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